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With secrets of
the author

THE
BORDERLAND OF INSANITY.

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By IRA RUSSELL, M. D., WINCHENDON, MASS.

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The Borderland of Insanity.

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MANY attempts have been made to define insanity, to give a definition that would cover all its phenomena. All such attempts have been defective, either including or excluding too much.

There is no standard of health and disease; so gradually do they shade into each other, that the line between them is an imaginary one. It is impossible to tell when daylight ends and darkness begins. Equally undefinable is the line which separates oddities, eccentricities, the passions of love and hatred, religious fanaticism, and many other mental manifestations from insanity.

That which in one person may be normal, in another becomes an indication of disease. The borderland of insanity is occupied by many persons who pass their whole lives near that line; sometimes on one side, sometimes on the other. Many cases have come under my care or observation that have been very difficult to classify.

A lady, aged sixty, a widow, belonging to one of the most distinguished New England families, refined, highly educated, energetic and very sagacious in the management of all her affairs, came under my care, with the following history:

She was left a widow with four small children, three sons and one daughter. By great prudence and energy, she managed to give them all a superior education. The daughter possessed a high order of talents. In short, the children were model children, and noted for their devotion to their mother. The daughter married a very worthy man and made a home for her mother, who had expended

her means in the care and education of her children. At first the mother was delighted with her new home, and for a while everything went on smoothly.

By degrees the mother became petulant; small things annoyed her. This state of mind grew worse and worse, and developed into hatred of both the daughter and her husband. At the same time she was very amiable and lady-like when in company with those outside her own family, and appeared like a model mother-in-law. She commences writing complaining letters to one of her sons, who is married. The letters have such an air of candor, truthfulness and honesty, that the son believes there must be some foundation for the complaints, blames the sister, sympathizes with the mother, and finally proposes to take her to his own home. He does so; she is delighted with the change; the son's wife is more to her than her own daughter. Very soon, however, there is a change in her feelings; she distrusts her son's affection for her; his wife is at fault in many things. She becomes unhappy and discontented; commences writing complaining letters to her daughter, setting forth her grievances and imploring her to take her back, and threatens suicide unless she does it. The daughter takes her back, with the same result as before.

One of her sons commits a homicide—kills the paramour of his wife. He is brought to trial; the plea of insanity is urged. The mother is indignant that such a plea should be offered. It would be a disgrace to the family, and above all, insists that none of her mental peculiarities shall be used to substantiate a hereditary tendency to insanity in the family. Neither was she willing that the facts about her father, who was subject to strange spells, and a brother, who died in an insane asylum, should be used. The son, after an exciting trial, was acquitted as insane, the mother expressing no satisfaction at the result. This lady when away from her children seemed to have all of a mother's natural affection for them.

While she had no positive delusions she had a wonderful faculty to pervert and discolor facts.

For years she was devotedly attached to her children, and made their home life exceedingly happy. Why the change? Was it because her children no longer needed her support, and that she no longer could look upon them as children? Was it because that part of the brain which presided over the love of offspring had no more work to do, that she hated those who shared the love that was once bestowed upon her?

Another lady, a widow, fifty-three years old, came under my observation, with the following history:

Left a widow with three children, two sons and a daughter. She was remarkable for her happy, genial disposition and business capacity. She met with a severe accident, and bore great suffering with uncommon fortitude. She had a strong affection for her children and devoted herself to their welfare. Her daughter marries to her satisfaction and provides for her mother a home. At first she enjoys her new home; everything goes on pleasantly for a year or two. Finally the mother takes a dislike to the son-in-law and then to the daughter. Everything they do for her is wrong. The more they try to please her and surround her with every comfort, the more disagreeable and fault-finding she becomes. As her son-in-law aptly said: "she makes his home a hell."

After a most thorough examination, I could detect no delusion. She expressed great respect for her son-in-law, and affection for her daughter.

Take another case:—A young lady, twenty-four years old, unmarried, well educated and intelligent. She has great repugnance and hatred of a younger sister. She says she can give no reason for this repugnance except that her mother had the same feeling toward her when a child, that lasted for several years, and then completely subsided.

In the last number of *THE ALIENIST AND NEUROLOGIST*, Dr. Hughes, the editor, refers to a lad of fourteen, in an article entitled "The Borderland of Psychiatric Records."

The doctor gives an account of the origin and symptoms as shown when he came under his care. Dr. Hughes advised his friends to consign him to my care after treating him for two months without any marked improvement.

I copy what he says of the case:

In January, 1882, S. A., a slender, but somewhat delicate youth of fourteen years, came under observation, suffering with facial chorea movements, and slight left ptosis. He had been tenderly and indulgently, and probably, luxuriously reared. His father and mother were nervous, and mentally somewhat peculiar, from a psychologist's stand-point, though not sufficiently singular to attract general attention or comment. The mental capacity of both parents was good; the business capacity and financial success of the father being above the average of his neighbor, his business now being that of a financier; but, after a severe business stress, he had himself been temporarily deranged, according to the statement of his son.

The habits of this youth were very studious, he being apt and advanced at school; above his companions at the time this affliction befell him, and his moral sensitiveness was excessive for his years. He became interested in religious matters, and began to question the unprofitableness of some of his actions, which are not regarded as violative of the decalogue, or usually considered improper. In short, his mind at this time had become overwrought from over study, too little sleep possibly, together with neglect of physical recreation.

At the season of the year when the potato vines were infested with the potato bug, the youth accompanied some of the hands into the field, and saw them put Paris green on the vines to kill the bugs. At this time also, a toy pistol was fired off close to his ear by a companion, producing a profound shock, and some cerebral disturbance. A short time after this incident, when potatoes were brought on the table, he took a morbid aversion to them, fearing they were poisoned, and would not eat them. This aversion soon extended to those who had handled them, and to the clothing of those who had handled either the potatoes from the field or the Paris green. He importuned his parents not to eat them, and avoided contact with them. Straightway he began the self-ablution

process, so peculiar to these patients, which he performed every time shortly after rising from the table, and after touching a member of the family. From a fear of potatoes, this delusive, morbid aversion, passed to a fear of everything that was green. The green wall-paper, table covers, book covers and carpets, were all regarded as poisonous, and his time was spent in avoiding these colors, and in washing away imaginary contamination. He would wash his hands after handling anything that any of his family had touched, even letters and papers received through the mail. Paris green, or arsenic, were pigments in all green colors, he thought, and it could not be reasoned out of him. It was volatile too, for he had read the reports of the Massachusetts State Health Board on that subject, and they proved it in regard to green wall-paper, because they showed that people were poisoned by sleeping in rooms which were papered with green wall-paper.

This boy was not melancholic. He enjoyed himself at play, and with the sights of the city, whenever nothing occurred to excite his morbid dread of green. Under the dominion of this delusive, morbid aversion, this young man was in constant misery, wherever there was anything green, except the green fields or plants. Our efforts at treating him were unsuccessful, because unfortunately the wall-paper, carpets, and some of the table covers of our house had green shades in them. On other subjects, this boy's reasoning was rational enough, and he was bright and observant, but his conviction became intensified, his suits of clothing from home having to be cast aside, and his trunks sold. He found something to keep alive the morbid feeling in the colors encountered by him, whenever we placed him in the city. Under such circumstances, we continued our efforts to treat him but a short time. At the end of two months of fruitless endeavor, we advised that he should be consigned to the care of Dr. Ira Russell, of Winchendon, Mass., hoping that at such a distance from home, and knowledge of our profitless experience, would enable the doctor to do him more good than we had done.

He first came to me in company with an aunt. When he saw me, he recognized me, having seen me at Dr. Hughes' house in St. Louis. He refused to stay in either of my houses; his aunt took him to a hotel, and the next

day left for Providence, R. I. A few weeks later his father came with him, and he agreed to stay provided his father would leave St. Louis, which he promised to do.

The following letter to his father shows his feeling in regard to St. Louis:

WINCHENDON, Nov. 2, '82.

DEAR FATHER: Received your letter this morning. Was glad to hear from you. Away off from home as many miles as I am, and a cloudy day, is enough to make anybody feel bad, especially when unwell.

O dear, I wish I was dead and buried long ago. I am making trouble for you and myself, and what good am I on earth, anyway? I wish you would not say anything about this to doctor. I will get a disease that will kill me off yet. Now what am I going to do? Kill me, and be done with it. If I was only dead, then you could do anything with my things. I would be dead and gone to *hell*—not make any difference to me.

Why can't I die and be done with it? About money: I asked ma' to send me some before I received that \$2.00 from her, because with \$2.00 you sent, I got a necktie for 38cts.; a paper of pins, .05; a ring of tape to mend my drawers, .05; some ink, .05. The rest in postal cards and stamps, and have a dollar left. The reason that I asked for more was that I wanted to get a hat or cap of some kind, and then I wanted to have a little money about me. Now, where have I spent anything foolishly?—not one single cent. I don't care whether a disease takes me or not. Please don't write anything I said to any of them, will you?

A patient here, a young man that is about well, said to me, "I have been well ever since I have been here, haven't I?" I said, "Yes."

I have not done a foolish thing in Winchendon. I am going down to take music lessons, but I guess I won't succeed much now after this. Since receiving your letter I don't feel as if I deserved to live at all, and won't, probably, much longer. I received the \$2.00 ma' sent the other day.

Good bye. Write soon.

ALBERT.

Also one to his mother, which shows his feeling about dirt.

WINCHENDON, MASS., Oct, 24, '82.

DEAR MOTHER: I received a letter from pa' yesterday. I have some bundles in my trunk that I am worrying over. I must not worry no more you know, because it makes my headache, and unless I get them away from me, I will worry over them. Now this is the only way to get rid of them. O Mamma, if I only had them out of the way I would be all right. I had them wrapped up when I came here. There is wrapped up my old blue suit of clothes, that is not fit to wear any longer, and a pair of old shoes and a lot of boxes and old papers of mine, all wrapped up together in a large bundle, and some old hats not fit to wear any more. Now, I can never get well if they are here all the time. They watch so close around here that I can hardly do anything with them, although they are not fit for anything. The only way I see to do, is for you to write to me a note to show to one of the young men here, that you said I might send those things to you. I can send them by freight, which wont cost much.

We do not want pa' to know anything about it though, and I guess pa' will be coming to Stratton soon. So you can pack them in your trunk when you get them, and go to Dixon on a visit right away, and drop them down their water closet, as grandma' wants it filled up anyway; that will be killing two birds with one stone, and it is a poor stone at that.

Now, Mamma, I must get rid of them before another week, if possible; then I will have nothing else to worry me. Then I can get well, and come home and be happy again. If we can't do that I will have to come home myself and do it, 'cause I can never get well if they are here. I am sick now worrying over them. I feel like going home, and I will, if they don't get away from here immediately. Now, Mamma, don't worry that I am getting worse, because I aint you know. I had them wrapped up when I came here, so I cannot be getting worse. Now, Mamma, don't write back something else, because I can't stand this worrying any longer. O dear, I feel like taking them down to the depot myself, and now I am worrying so about them. I will surely come home if they don't get away from me. Don't let anybody know that I sent them, will you? and don't let the folks at Dixon know, will you? If they are too large (the bundles), mash them, and get a stick and push them down. Don't you open them by any

means, please. I am telling you the truth what is in these. Don't drop any down at Streator (?) If they fill up your trunk take out all your things only what you need at Dixon, and leave them at Grandma' Moon's, as you will be coming back soon anyway. I will worry myself if you don't do that. I might die. As this is the last, please do it, as I have thrown off so many of my other notions. O, you will have to send me five dollars: course it won't take it all, but I will want some now and then.

Good-bye. Write soon.

ALBERT.

P.S.—Be sure and write the very minute you get this, and send money. I can be so happy. Don't forget to send a note to me, to one of the young men, if they should ask for one.

I placed him in charge of an intelligent tutor, and set him to studying. He was favorably impressed with the plan, and recited regularly in history, grammar and arithmetic, and occasionally took lessons in music. He played billiards and other games, and took great pains to conceal his fears of dirt and poison. His tutor kept a careful record of his doings and symptoms.

November 3. During the day appeared happy. In the evening complained of a frontal headache, or as he called it, not a regular headache, but a kind of corner headache.

November 4. No recitation, restless, uneasy and discontented. Refuses to play games; seems absorbed in thought. His eyes have a vacant, listless expression. After tea became interested in games; his countenance brightened up; he became cheerful and happy.

November 6. Enjoyed his recitations; played games; seemed quite happy.

November 7. Recitations very good. He talks about insane asylums; said the reason so many persons became insane was owing to too close study while young, and that his nervousness was due to the same cause.

From this time onward he continued to recite to his tutor, spending one or two hours a day in study and recitation. The remainder of the time was spent in riding, games and walking. He exhibited less and less fear of dirt and poison. After staying with me four months he left very much improved. He returned again in June,

and remained with me through the summer, no one suspecting there was anything the matter with him.

He sometimes admitted to me that his old thoughts came into his mind.

He was treated mainly with tonics, such as iron, strychnine, phosphorus and plenty of outdoor exercise.

Another case somewhat resembling the preceding, was that of a man aged forty-five. A large well developed man, of sanguine temperament—a skilled mechanic. For fourteen years, he had been foreman in a furniture manufacturing shop, employing a large number of men. He was very methodical and accurate in all his work, selecting and buying material with sound judgment and skill. His shop hands first noticed a hesitancy in touching anything. When he wished to take hold of anything, he would raise his hand, advance toward it slowly, and with great effort grasp the object in view.

Engage him in conversation and in the midst of it, carelessly ask him to hand you a paper, or any object, and he would do it without hesitation. But if you asked him to look at the paper, or to read something in it, he would make several efforts before he would succeed in doing it. At the table it was with great difficulty that he could summon sufficient will-power to take food when offered to him.

He would write a letter and express himself clearly, and hesitate a long time before putting it in an envelope; and if he did not utterly fail to do it, he would remove it a dozen times perhaps, before sealing it, to see if he had not placed something besides a letter in it. After mailing it, he would be in agony for fear he had written something he ought not, or placed something besides the letter in the envelope.

At times he could hardly persuade himself to dress, through his fear of touching his clothing.

While he was naturally a most methodical man, he was utterly incapable of doing anything in a systematic manner.

He perfectly understood the absurdity of his notions, and could reason correctly upon his own case. He would say, "This dread of touching things is perfectly ridiculous, and I know it, but I cannot control the spell that holds me." After a most distressing effort to take a newspaper from the table, he would shed tears, because, as he said, he was so foolish. After passing from one room to another, he would return several times, to see if he had not dropped something.

Before coming to me, he had been in this condition eight or nine months. I gave him, bromide potass., cannabis indica and ergot. I was building a barn at the time. I soon got him interested in the work, and he began to assist the carpenters. He soon found that when the work was marked out for him he could bore a hole and make a mortise without trouble. He steadily improved, and, after three months' treatment, went home well.

This last case is one that Hammond designates *aboulomania*, or paralysis of the will; and Prof. Tambourini, of Italy, insanity of doubting, with fear of contact.

There is another class of persons subject to attacks of disagreeableness, due to what I may be allowed to call, mental epilepsy, in which, as Maudsley says, there is a convulsion of ideas, not of muscles—cases in which there is no loss of consciousness.

A distinguished clergyman came under my care. After great mental effort, preaching extemporaneously on Sunday, he would appear tired and exhausted. After resting a while he would become excited, and would abuse his wife and family with the most insulting and opprobrious language. After a few hours this state of excitement would pass away, and he would become himself again. These attacks increased in frequency, until he came under treatment. I gave him bromide potass., hyoscyamus, cannabis indica, chloral hydrate, variously combined; electricity and tonics, iron, strychnine, phosphorus and nitro-glycerine. After several months' treatment these attacks subsided.

Miss A., a lady of marked intellectual ability, of a nervous temperament; her father epileptic; mother died insane. Although lady-like, refined in manners, lovely and affectionate in disposition, and a great favorite in society from childhood, she was subject to what her intimate friends and family called mad fits.

Without any apparent reason, she would be very bitter toward her mother, or some other member of her family, using the severest terms of censure. These turns never occurred except in the presence of her own family, or most intimate friends. She married quite young; her husband was a clergyman, a man of marked ability. She was proud of him, and had the greatest love for him. Still, at uncertain, unexpected intervals of a few weeks, sometimes months, an unusual paleness of the countenance would appear, and without any loss of consciousness, she would go into a paroxysm of scolding, fault-finding and vituperation, lasting for a few hours, when she would resume her wonted good nature and cheerfulness. She has often expressed the fear that she would sometime become insane.

A distinguished divine, a D. D., married to a cousin, and late in life became insane.

One son was an imbecile, another a clergyman of uncommon ability. The latter had periods in which he had an overpowering sense of his sinfulness, and would for days be plunged into the very depths of despair, followed by periods of ecstatic delight, when he felt that he was basking in the sunlight of God's favor.

A daughter of the last mentioned, a bright, nervous child, at the age of twelve, joined the church, and was looked upon as a model Christian. At eighteen, she began to distrust her religious hope, and finally abandoned it, and felt that she was forever lost. After six months of gloom and despair, she was reconverted, with periods of exalted religious enjoyment like her father. She wrote many religious books noted for their high spiritualistic type; "Stepping Heavenward," and others of a similar character.

Recently I have had under my care a clergyman, aged thirty-seven, a large portly man, of a bilious, nervous temperament, a popular preacher, possessing fine oratorical power. He came from the British Provinces, where he had been a successful preacher, but unfortunately had become involved in financial difficulties, and was obliged to give up his parish. He came to the States, and was soon employed by one of our churches as a pastor. His creditors from the Provinces followed him, vilified him, trusted his salary, and in various ways annoyed him. These annoyances made him moody, melancholic, and absent-minded. He goes to a book store, purchases a book, and takes another. He is watched, followed, and arrested for stealing. He is seen and examined by several medical experts, and in view of their opinion, the District Attorney declined to prosecute the complaint.

The mental symptoms that I have noticed, besides his moodiness, were occasional attacks of an epileptiform character, with only partial loss of consciousness, followed by lapse of memory and a disposition to disagree with, and contradict whatever was said by those about him. After a period of dullness, he would return to his former self. He continued to improve, and has resumed his pulpit and pastoral labors.

Several years ago I received a telegram requesting me to take charge of a "quiet lad" of fourteen years, recommended to my care by the late lamented Dr. John E. Tyler. Without waiting for a reply, the parents of the boy brought him to me.

I very soon discovered this "quiet lad" in a very dangerous position on the top of the barn. He readily came down, and soon after was found in the garden, pulling up the vegetables for the benefit of the pigs. Directly afterwards he was found in the pig-pen in pursuit (he said) of a bristle to make a waxed end. At this point his parents left.

Very soon the boy disappeared, but after a while returned thoroughly drenched, having fallen into the water

while attempting to launch a boat. He was now placed in the care of an attendant, with instruction, to keep him under constant observation.

In the evening he joined the family circle, was very pleasant and happy, showing his familiarity with certain games and puzzles, and singing his Sunday school songs, being accompanied by one of the ladies of the family on the piano.

At bed-time he was shown by the housekeeper to his sleeping room.

There he knelt and made a prayer, in which he remembered his parents and sister and the different members of my family. The housekeeper returned with tears in her eyes, saying she had never heard such a beautiful prayer as that little harum-scarum had made. I subsequently learned the following facts, in regard to his history, and certain hereditary tendencies:

His father was a quiet, substantial business man, his mother a lady of great refinement and nervous temperament.

His maternal grandmother was a woman of marked ability, a devoted member of the methodist church, eccentric, erratic, domineering, always bent upon having her own way, making others conform to her wishes, and a terror to her minister.

A maternal uncle was a dipsomaniac, another was noted for his crooked ways of obtaining money.

Several months before coming to me, this boy witnessed the death of his maternal grandfather, to whom he was very much attached, and with whom he was a great favorite. The event made a deep impression upon his mind. Death, religion, and a future life, were his constant theme of conversation. After a while he began to have intervals of depression, followed by periods of unusual cheerfulness and vivacity, which finally developed into obstinacy and unwillingness to be controlled. These periods of obstinacy would last for a few days, when he would relapse into a depressed and quiet stage.

When he came to me, as already remarked, I placed him in charge of an attendant. After a few days he became very quiet and gentlemanly in his conduct. This condition lasted for three weeks, when he began to be talkative; then indulged in exhilarated boasting of what he could do, reminding one of the exaltation observed in general paresis; then obstinate, profane and belligerent. This state of mind lasted for three days, when he took a religious turn for three days, and then became quiet again. These periods occurred regularly every month for six months, when they began to be less marked, and finally disappeared entirely.

He remained well until nineteen years old, when, during the last presidential campaign, he joined a drum corps. He was frequently out late at night. This was followed by an attack of mild melancholia, lasting three or four months, from which he has recovered and remained well.

Miss A., aged twenty-three, brought to my Highland Family Home on a litter, with the following history:

Her mother, a widow, belonged to one of the old distinguished quaker families in New York. The daughter had been an invalid for two years. She had been treated in some water-cure establishment for womb trouble and special complaints, without benefit, but rather grew worse.

She left the water-cure and was taken to Newport, R. I., where she consulted Dr. H. R. Stover, who discovered no womb trouble that needed treatment, and advised that she be placed under my care.

I found her well nourished, all her bodily functions well performed, pulse and temperature normal. She complained of a great variety of symptoms; pain in her back, in her head and in her limbs. She was unable to sit up, hardly able to move in bed. I soon found that when complaining of pain, if by any means her attention could be diverted to something outside herself, she would forget all about it. I placed her in charge of a judicious attendant, and every effort was made to arouse her ambi-

tion, and to commend her whenever she made any attempt to exert herself. Such attempts were gradually successful. At first she thought she could bear no light or noise in her room. I prescribed sun baths. Before she was taken sick she was fond of playing on the piano. Her attendant was a good pianist; so I put a piano in her room. Her attendant performed such pieces of music as she had been accustomed to admire. She began to sit up a little, then to walk a few steps at a time, none of which she had done for two years. Then, with considerable urging, she played for two or three minutes at a time on the piano. The next step was to have her go to the table, and take her meals with the family, and finally take long drives, all of which she found she could do without inconvenience. The great difficulty in her case, has been to divert her of the idea that she was an invalid, and of the fascination of being pitied and waited upon. She was not altogether a fraud. She had been made to believe by injudicious friends and medical advisers, that her complaints were real. In her case, as in many similar ones, there has been a vein of moral perversity, a disposition to exaggerate and give a false coloring to everything done for her.

While she appears amiable and lovely, and expresses the highest regard for her attendants, she would write to her mother that she was neglected and abused, inventing some ridiculous incident to show it. Becoming inspired with the prospect of marriage, her progress to complete recovery has been rapid. This lady is a type of many similar cases that have come under my observation, some of whom have been regarded as martyrs of great suffering by sympathizing friends.